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Scientific secrets

The necessity for the broad new authorization for the classification of government information contained in President Reagan's recent Executive Order (E&P, Sept. 11, page 8) has been questionable.

At a recent meeting of business paper editors at the White House, the President was asked about it and responded "we have just realized the extent to which we have given away—or it has been stolen—American technological and scientific information." He said the Order is an attempt to close some of these avenues through which the Soviets have taken home our technological information. He assured the editors there is "no desire to close off legitimate knowledge and information" from the American people.

Judging from a report by a panel of 19 scientists and academics to the National Academy of Sciences last week we believe the President is being misled by his security advisors. The panel which had briefings at secret and top secret levels said virtually the whole problem of leakage comes from direct and indirect Soviet purchase of U.S. equipment as well as espionage. In other words, it doesn't come from reports in the press.

According to estimates by the intelligence community, the panel said, "70% of the militarily significant technology acquired by the Soviet Union has been acquired through . . . intelligence organizations, using both overt and covert methods. Most of the rest is acquired through legal purchases of equipment or data."

The net effect of extending broad powers to government agencies and bureaus to classify information on the excuse it involves national security is to keep the information from the American people. If it involves truly security information, the chances are the Soviets already have had it given to them by some bureaucrat, or have purchased it, or stolen it. As has always been true, the vast bulk of security classifications is unnecessary.